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AGRICULTURE & INNOVATION

Innovation support services



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table of contents



How can innovation support services and innovation brokering help to get operational groups off the ground?	3
How can innovation support services be funded?.....	7
Linking partners	10
Infographic	12

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Supporting Innovation

The EIP-AGRI aims at supporting innovation following the interactive bottom-up approach which relies mainly on co-operation, sharing of knowledge and intermediating advisory methods.

This approach will be implemented under the EIP-AGRI via the creation of Operational Groups: groups of people (such as farmers, researchers, advisors etc.) who work together on a practical innovation project with concrete objectives (for more information see the EIP-AGRI fact sheet on Operational Groups).

One of the lessons learned in connection with the former Rural Development programmes is that sometimes it is not enough to offer stand-alone funding for groups cooperating on innovation projects. Innovation support services and innovation brokering which work using models that are adapted to local conditions could play a crucial role in bringing the right people into the projects, connecting farmers and advisors with researchers and helping to identify funding.

In short, innovation support services and brokering could play a crucial role in getting many worthwhile projects off the ground and capturing grassroots ideas from practitioners.





How can innovation support services help to get Operational Groups off the ground?



Individual actors may have difficulties in finding partners and starting Operational Group projects. Therefore, raising awareness and facilitating the participation in innovation actions are important activities for the development of innovation projects under the EIP-AGRI.

Innovation support services could have an important role leading initiatives that bring stakeholders together so that they can each present their needs.

Some innovation support services use thematic groups or networks to do this and these may then focus on specific challenges for a particular sector to deal with. Others invite knowledgeable stakeholders or potential interested parties to develop work on topics that may have innovation potential.

'For me the most satisfying moment was when the people would open their mind and hearts to us and wanted to participate at the project. The combination between stimulating farmer's interest, helping the conservation of a valuable breed and at the same time involve the university researchers was a big challenge.'
- Edit Pop

Innovation brokering has a key role in discovering grassroots ideas and helping to develop concrete projects. The broker plays the role of "matchmaker", helping partners to find each other and facilitating the start-up of Operational Groups with specific aims.

He acts as a go-between and connects innovation actors (farmers, researchers, NGOs, etc.) around an idea that may become an innovation. Brokers help to find and refine innovative ideas, find the adequate partners and funding, and identify the potential roles of each of the partners. Their main task is to prepare a project proposal which is endorsed by all actors and help them put forward a successful funding application.

Small companies have small muscles; however, they can have big ideas. Our mission is to develop their ideas in a way that can make them grow.
Dr. Stein Harald Hjeltnes

The role played by innovation brokering can be described in several main steps:

- Discovering innovative ideas. This process can be facilitated by having strong links with practitioners and understanding the realities on the ground but also with the research world and other possible actors. It is good to make use of existing networks and platforms and to participate in related events in order to draw relevant information from them.
- Connecting potential partners with complementary knowledge, competences and infrastructure and taking the initiative to help them to refine the innovative idea. This may include "cross-cutting" beyond sectors, regions and/or scientific disciplines. This can be done by using creative processes in which the possible partners are invited to articulate their needs, opportunities and expectations so that the project addresses what they perceive as important characteristics of the emerging innovation idea. It is

the innovation broker's role to keep people active and motivated by looking for common ground and win-win solutions.

- Identifying funding sources and providing partners with a solid understanding of what criteria need to be fulfilled in order to make an application for financing.
- Preparing a project proposal including a clear partnership agreement which is endorsed by all actors and helping them put forward a successful funding application.

"The value of an idea lies in the using of it"
(Thomas Alva Edison, inventor of the light bulb)



Innovation support services and innovation brokers should be well visible and work on the long-term. They should ideally have a good connection to, and a thorough understanding of, the agricultural world as well as well-developed communication skills for interfacing and facilitating.

Partners involved in a certain Operational Group, from practice to science/ market, have different backgrounds and are used to work in different professional contexts, so it will prove useful if innovation brokers can "translate" between partners, helping them understand each other's needs and expectations. Added value in particular can be expected where the innovation broker's approach is as "cross-cutting" as possible: trying to go beyond the silos of existing sectors, regions, initiatives and/or scientific disciplines.

This may help the mixing of diverse ideas, customs, etc. of different places or groups of people and lead to more innovative results. Innovation brokers can work in many different ways, for example some might use vouchers which pay for a few meetings where brokers and partners can discuss concrete ideas and put the proposal on paper, lowering both the administrative burden and making it easier to use brokerage services.

We work together with agricultural cooperatives, suppliers, industry, advisory services, farming schools, universities, public financing entities.
- Dr. Stein Harald Hjeltnes





Yann Pouliquen, SME, Galicia



Yann Pouliquen is technical manager of the Xestión Agrogandeira e Natureza SL. He works for a small Galician (Spain) firm that advises a small group agricultural entities. "As an advisor, I make sure that they not only can keep their revenues up and preferably even increase their revenue, but also invest in technical development and at the same time protect the environment by using sustainable methods.

Often a call to action and innovative ideas come from them, but sometimes I receive a question or project proposal from a university or research organization. The agricultural groups that I advise are rather small but it is a challenging activity to identify their needs on all the necessary levels. Therefore, I prefer to work with regional partners when setting up pilot projects. I know them well, I can identify them and I know their weaknesses and strengths.

The main issues I am facing is the fact that because they are small in numbers, it is very hard to find interested partners and get graded for funding. (universities need

to do research and publish their results to be graded and receive funding.) Theoretically they are interested in becoming partners of certain agricultural pilot projects. But because the agricultural groups are very small, they are maybe less interesting for universities.

So we need to attract their interest. However, the only way to motivate agricultural groups is to do from an economic point of view. If the proposed projects are presented in combination with the availability of funding to compensate for the time spent, it will be easier to motivate farmers to participate. So my job is also to search for funding sources to keep the actors on board. In my line of expertise as an adviser, I believe that innovation brokers who are new at the business should assess the needs of their clients in detail but also look for the necessary funding otherwise it will be very hard to implement the cooperation projects.

The EIP-AGRI Service Point could be very interesting for advisors like me because I want to learn about other projects who are also struggling with the same issues and maybe we can help each other.





Dr. Stein Harald Hjeltnes, private consultancy, Norway



Close collaboration

Dr. Stein Harald Hjeltnes is CEO of Njøs næringsutvikling and is responsible for the cluster project Arena fruit and berries. "We work together with agricultural cooperatives, suppliers, industry, advisory services, farming schools, universities, public financing entities. The brokering methods are both systematically developed, at request or at visit. During the years we have developed close relationships with the companies in the sector, and have good knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses both regarding human and financial capacities.

We visit the companies and also have regular seminars where we meet representatives from the companies in the cluster. Then we get a closer look at their business and possible ideas to develop their business. This may give rise to new innovations. In some occasions we are contacted by the companies when they have project ideas, and need help to develop the project both concerning R&D partners and where to get financial support. We then develop the projects in close collaboration with the three partners.

A deep knowledge to the whole industry, R&D, financing

bodies, rural development programmes and political systems are needed to be a broker that the companies will listen to and open their mind to give ideas that could be worked on.

Many of the companies are small, and they have low focus on innovation. They focus on getting the wheel running every day. On the other hand, these companies are frequently taking part in the joint meetings and other activities concerning capacity building and knowledge transfer, as long as we keep these meetings short and with an agenda that they feel give them a pay-back.

Grow ideas and businesses

Small companies have small muscles; however, they can have big ideas. Our mission is to develop their ideas in a way that can make them grow. In the beginning of the process, we experienced that the members did not see any considerable results of taking participation, and we solved this partly by increased focus on communication. Now we inform the members by e-mail every week or every second week about what activities and actions have been made in the cluster, and which collaborative projects have been developed and financed.





How can innovation support services and brokering be funded?

Creative funding

The Rural Development regulation offers the following possibilities for funding actions of innovation brokering:

- Innovation networking under the National Rural Development Network: general National Rural Networks (NRNs), or dedicated EIP networking functions under the umbrella of NRNs, could install or contract an innovation brokerage service.
- Cooperation: using innovation brokering to set up an operational group and prepare a project proposal (i.e. by finding participants etc.) could be financed under the cooperation measure.
- Support for setting up of advisory services with a particular focus on innovation.

If the project of the Operational Group is granted funding and once it is up and running, the innovation broker could provide organisational support and become the facilitator of the project.

A network of innovators

The first Horizon 2020 call will include several opportunities to support demand-driven innovation actions in agriculture, the supply chain and rural areas through multi-national projects, in particular through “thematic networks” and “multi-actor projects”.

One particular thematic network will help to build a wide network of innovation support services by exchanging and developing methods for innovation brokering and advisory activities with a focus on innovation actions. Successful techniques for finding innovative ideas and partners should be revealed through the exchange between existing services and brokers in the project.

*I not only use all the brains that I have,
but all that I can borrow.*
- Woodrow Wilson

In doing so, the project will improve skills and education on innovation approaches and increase exchanges between European regions on innovative matters in support of the EIP-AGRI (for more information, see the Horizon 2020 factsheet).





Edit Pop, innovation support, Romania



Researchers and farmers work together

Edit Pop has experience in supporting innovation and facilitating cooperation in Maramures County, Romania. Located in the northern Carpathians close to the border with Ukraine the area presents beautiful rural landscapes made of patches of arable land, forest, wetland and grassland that provide an important agro-ecological function.

The project in which Mrs. Pop has been involved looked into ways to identify and promote new farming approaches and find the economic mechanisms to support new agri-environmental techniques and valorize the entrepreneurial knowledge and ideas from the ground. It also aimed to encourage farmers and researchers from the Baia Mare University to work together and harvest the benefits of a successful cooperation model.

One of the areas Mrs. Pop has been most active is in promoting: "After Romania's accession to the EU, there have been challenges to meet the EU's standards for safety and hygiene. This stimulated farmers to look into new ways for cattle grazing which put less pressure on the grasslands. The "Bruna de Maramures" cattle breed which is used mainly for meat production is a valuable genetic resource in Maramures but it is in danger of being lost from in-situ conservation due to incentives which cause farmers to be more involved in dairy production."

The project was looking for ways to make this cattle breed more profitable to farmers and organised consultation meetings in the villages. They gathered knowledge and ideas from farmers and farming organisations which were using the grazing land about



the potential economic benefits and the win-win solutions. The Northern University of Baia Mare was interested to monitor the evolution of the different types of grasses on the grazing plateau and wanted to learn more about the in-situ preservation of this particular cattle breed so they were invited to join the project.

Funding for the cooperation

But these were just the first steps, they had to find funding sources to continue supporting the cooperation so Edit Pop started looking for opportunities. During this search period, she used her skills and knowledge of the communities and people to build trust in this approach and keep them on board.

Eventually Edit Pop contributed to a successful application for funding available from an NGO in the Netherlands and this led to the project being put into practice. The "Bruna de Maramures" was reintroduced for summer grazing and farmers were satisfied with the results. After the University North of Baia Mare had assessed the first results, other farmers from the surrounding villages expressed their interest to participate in the project. The meat of the Bruna de Maramures cattle started to be used in promoting tourism and this contributed to extra revenue for the farmers.

"For me the most satisfying moment was when the people would open their mind and hearts to us and wanted to participate at the project. The combination between stimulating farmer's interest, helping the conservation of a valuable breed and at the same time involve the university researchers was a big challenge. You need to assess from the beginning what the needs and expectations are for all the stakeholders. The project was a success because we all worked together, helped each other and kept being enthusiastic about this new idea."





Linking partners



EIP-AGRI Service Point

Facilitating exchange of information concerning innovative initiatives in EU agriculture is an objective of the EIP-AGRI Service Point. We invite everyone to contribute to this work by sharing knowledge of ongoing initiatives at EU, national, regional or local level. You can do this using the e-forms on our website.

This includes the mapping of research and innovation actions, projects and initiatives undertaken by operational groups and relevant innovation networks and clusters in Member States.

As the format of the resulting database will assure an easy use of search parameters it will prove an excellent tool to facilitate the work of innovation support services and innovation brokering.

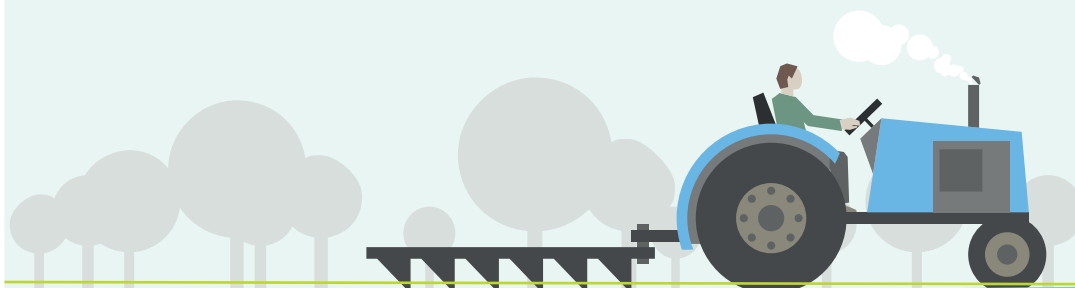
More information

You can reach us:

At our office:
EIP-AGRI Service Point
Avenue du Toison d'Or 72
1060 Brussels
Belgium

By telephone: +32 2 543 73 48
By e-mail: servicepoint@eip-agri.eu

Through our website:
<http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/>
Twitter: @EIPAGRI_SP
LinkedIn: [be.linkedin.com/in/eipagriservicepoint/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/eipagriservicepoint/)
LinkedIn company: EIP-AGRI Service Point





Bio-competence centre of healthy dairy products, Estonia

The focus of the Bio-Competence Centre of Healthy Dairy Products Estonia is on cooperating with milk producers and processors to engage them in applied research and technological development of projects aiming at providing consumers with highest quality and healthy dairy products.

The projects combine the efforts of cattle breeders, geneticists, animal feeding scientists, microbiologists, technologists, nutritionists and biochemists, to cover the entire chain of production, starting from cattle breeding up to making healthy milk products. Applied research such as this has an important role in driving projects because of their facilitation skills, knowledge of the funding opportunities and organizing experience. Complementary with promoting the use of Rural Development funding for innovation projects the Bio-Competence Centre of Healthy

Dairy Products also facilitates the application of the innovation voucher subsidy via Enterprise Estonia.

This innovation voucher subsidy is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. By making use of the voucher SMEs can receive some funding to study innovative solutions to development, test new materials, discuss new technologies, etc.



